

Minutes
Work Group
Spokane County Voluntary Stewardship Program
March 9, 2022
6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Work Group Members Present: Casey Flanagan, Doug Greenlund, Methea Sapp, Kat Hall, Ty Meyer, Alene Lindstrand

Staff: Joe Zimbric,

Guest: Levi Keesecker, Emma Greenwood

Facilitator: Andy Dunau

Welcome and Administration: The meeting convened via MS Teams video conference.

Casey made a motion to approve the January minutes and Doug seconded. The motion was approved.

Joe welcomed Kat Hall with the Lands Council to the workgroup. Amanda, who was promoted to Executive Director of the Lands Council, asked that she be replaced with Kat. Kat is the Council's Restoration Program Director. She's worked with the CD and others for many years on riparian projects and beaver analog dams.

Per the previous meeting, Joe updated the workgroup member application and initiated recruitment. This is to replace two members who resigned due to lack of time availability. The application can be filled out on-line. Joe will distribute the link to workgroup members for distribution. The application deadline is March 28th.

Levi announced that the WA State Conservation Commission hired Paige DeChambeau to help VSP groups develop outreach materials and support workgroup member recruitment and retention.

Informational Updates and Program Planning

House Bill 1838: This bill was introduced during the current legislative session. Among its many components were requirements (with certain specified exemptions) for public and private landowners who own property adjacent to a body of water identified and mapped on a riparian management zone map to establish, maintain, and protect the riparian management zone (RMZ) (also called buffers).

Significant concerns were raised by agricultural and livestock producers, associations and other stakeholders. The bill was not voted out of committee. Whether it comes back in a revised form in the next legislative session is unknown. Staff will track.

Hangman Creek Watershed Meetings: The Conservation District held outreach meetings on February 24th and March 3rd. The CD shared technical assistance and funding support available

to implement conservation practices. There were about 40 participants in the first meeting and 15 in the second meeting.

Farm Smart Certification and Bio-farming: Ty gave an update on development of SCD bio-farming program. The overall goal is to improve soil health by helping producers reduce use of synthetics and fertilizers. Research has shown that use of these materials over time has resulted in diminished soil health and losses in productivity.

Currently they are working with more than 20 large track producers with about 125 thousand acres in production. They are experimenting with several “natural” approaches to enhancing soil health and productivity such as applying micro-nutrients, biologicals, using cover crops and integrated grazing. Each has its challenges to implement at a large scale.

They are also working on a large USDA grant request to support the program with three universities, growers and processors that also has a carbon sequestration component.

In a related effort, the SCD acquired the Farm Smart Certification from Pacific Northwest Direct Seed Association (PNDSA). As the natural processes of bio-farming prove out, the Farm Smart Certification will be used for recognition and as a marketing tool to enhance the value of these crops to buyers.

Edge of Field Report: Joe is working on compiling final statistics and report for Edge of Field study. As previously reported, from 2018 – 2020 a comparison (paired study) was made of a no-till site and conventional tillage site with potential sediment loading to a waterway. The no-till site had no detectable sediment loading and the conventional till site had 136 lbs of sediment loss per acre, per year.

If one multiplies this out by the thousands of acres converted to no-till, it confirms the environmental benefits of converting to no till. Specifically, retaining healthy soils on farm land and enhancing quality water quality through reduced sediment loading. In addition, the study results are even better than what would be predicted using the RUSLE model that NRCS and CD use to calculate potential reductions in soil loss when adopting no-till farming and buffer practices.

Monitoring and Project Development

Conservation Project Development List: Joe reported that the list was updated to include newly funded projects such as the Hangman Creek Riparian Restoration and Conservation Program, fish barrier removal, stream bank stabilization, riparian planting, commodity buffer installation, and livestock fencing.

Conservation Project Data Base: 2021 updates are complete. The summary table used for VSP benchmark reporting for conservation practices was also updated. Spokane VSP continues to meet, and in some cases greatly exceeds, benchmarks. Joe also showed how he's using maps to show where conservation practices, e.g.—conservation tillage and nutrient management, are being installed. A long-term goal is to better understand the degree to which conservation practices are being implemented in the highest need areas. For instance, sediment loading in

Hangman Creek is a priority concern. Using maps and other data, can VSP demonstrate that conservation tillage is effectively addressing this concern.

Wetland Assessment: Joe reviewed Columbia Plateau Wetland Hydrology LANDSAT imagery made available through a University of Washington project. It showed that between 1984 and 2011, the annual mean surface water area for wetlands in western Spokane County increased slightly. The VSP wetland compares for 2011 – 2017, which used a different methodology, also showed no statistically significant change.

Methea asked if the data could be updated with more recent data. Joe will contact UW to see if the data is available and whether they or he could run an updated compare. Alene asked if this type of data was being used to assess specific lands, e.g.—at the landowner or parcel level. The data is not used in this way. Its intent is to monitor trends at the watershed level.

Joe and Methea started working with Ducks Unlimited to develop student activities to determine possible changes in wetland functions and values at Saltse Flats after restoration. This is an initial piece to better understanding the qualitative outcomes of wetland restoration. Put differently, it's one thing to assess if there is any statistical loss of wetlands over time, and another thing to assess if the overall functions and values of wetlands are worse, the same or better over time.

Member Updates

Emma reported that as part of Spokane Tribal work in the Little Spokane, she's started organizing riparian plantings that are part of 319 grant implementation.

Doug reported that the Spokane Aquifer Joint Board received a Department of Health Source Water Protection Grant to review aquifer water quality issues of abandoned gravel pits being put to new uses.

Action Items and Closing:

Administration:

- Review workgroup member applications

Project Development:

- Support South and Valley Farm Corridor projects
- Create and send targeted mail materials
- Continue to identify new project opportunities

Outreach:

- Continue to add projects to Conservation Map

Monitoring:

- Continue working with Spokane County on acquiring aerial imagery

- Ask UW if more recent wetland LANDSAT imagery is available to continue assessing changes over time.
- Continue developing wetland monitoring project with Methea's students and Ducks Unlimited.
- Continue exploring other wetland assessment opportunities.
- Continue development of Hangman Creek watershed modeling

Next Meeting

The next VSP meeting will be May 11th.